Fieldwork Methods: Ethnology

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1. Introduction

This chapter will examine the issues that arise when conducting fieldwork on an ethnic group different from your own. It will discuss what can be expected and what precautions should be taken. Fieldwork on ethnic groups different from one's own is distinctive of cultural anthropology, and there are clear links with issues related to research on different cultures and cross-cultural understanding.

2. Fieldwork and cross-cultural understanding

Fieldwork involving long stays in the target location is a research methodology also referred to as "participant observation", and it is the basic methodology used in cultural anthropological research, which takes as its main research theme the study of other cultures. Ideally, a single researcher should insert himself into a different culture or a group with a different social background from that of himself, and live among them for an extended period, of at least one year, in order to study the target group holistically. For this sort of fieldwork, which takes different ethnicities and cultures as its research targets, the researcher must, in the first instance, learn the language of the target ethnic group. Then, through experience, mistakes and failure, the researcher must learn the norms of that culture, and the culture itself. The study of different ethnic groups, based on fieldwork, is distinct in that learning about different cultures is achieved through the personal experiences of fieldworkers.

A cultural anthropologist will select as the targets for his research cultures and groups different from their own, into which his own culture and its norms, understood instinctively by the anthropologist, will not translate. It is not possible, before beginning research into cultures and peoples so different to his own by heading into the field, for the cultural anthropologist to create a strict research plan or construct a clear hypothesis. Rather than creating strict plans and establishing hypotheses to be verified, what the anthropologist should be doing before setting out into the field is constructing a general image, or framework, for the research to be conducted and about the group to be studied.

3. Fieldwork on different cultures

The cultural anthropologist deliberately travels to a field far removed from the environment of his own daily life. This is because he is seeking out a different culture or ethnic group he wishes to better understand.

There are, however, many amusing anecdotes about anthropologists who have just begun their fieldwork, or who are just about to begin. The one about the anthropologist who arrived in the target country, only to find it almost impossible to get used to life in the village, inconvenient and unaccustomed as it was, and so instead spent half a year in a hotel in a neighbouring town, "improving his language skills". Or the one about the anthropologist who, having started his fieldwork, simply couldn't understand the language being spoken and therefore the significance of what the people were actually doing. Having determined to do some research, he would ask the local people questions, and although what he wanted to ask was somehow communicated to the target group, their answers were entirely lost in translation. Or the one about the anthropologist who was not able to make any friends among the villagers who did not share his middle-class background, as a result began to suffer from homesickness and melancholy, and ended up absorbed in the novels he had brought with him from home. Or the one about the anthropologist who wanted to reflect on his fieldwork by looking through his fieldnotes and shut himself away in his living quarters to do so, but found himself the target of concern among the local people, who couldn't understand what he was doing all by himself, and so broke down the door to check on him, prompting the anthropologist to rage about the terrible invasion of his privacy.

Despite having arrived seeking out different cultures and new, unknown worlds, the anthropologists from these anecdotes find themselves faced with considerable stress

from the outset, from homesickness and lack of privacy. It is no exaggeration to say that all fieldworkers experience, during this initial period, a sense of deep unease about the paucity or the quality data being obtained, particularly in consideration of the amount of time being invested. At first, the anthropologist cannot understand the language and customs, and so finds himself in chaos, like a child in an unfamiliar environment.

Despite this stress, it is vital that the anthropologist continues to make his records. There are no rules set in stone for how to record fieldwork experiences, and each fieldworker should make whatever adaptations are necessary according to his situation, not least because the conditions and circumstances of each field will be different. In a village supplied with electricity, the fieldworker can perhaps record his findings directly onto a laptop, and then create useful fieldnotes that are easy to search and organize later on. In a village with no such supply, he will need to put pen to paper.

It is said that there is no "right way" to do fieldwork. In recent years, we have seen increasing numbers of classes on "Fieldwork Theory", but most people still maintain that fieldwork is not something to be learned in a classroom, but rather something learned on the job.

I never had any opportunity to learn about fieldwork methodologies in any systematic way before heading to the field. I did receive some one-to-one advice from a teacher about how to take fieldnotes, and that was a great help in my fieldwork. While there might indeed be variations among the methods adopted by fieldworkers, what is common to all fieldwork is the fact that it means nothing unless observations are properly recorded. We cannot rely on human memory alone, and we change on a daily basis; it is reasonable to say that I will be a different person tomorrow. All that is required to forget the details of what has happened—even if it is written it down—is a few days to pass. Fieldworkers must rely a great deal on their own experiences, but these cannot be drawn up subsequently unless they are recorded. The term "field" has connotations of wildness, but fieldwork itself must comprise principally of writing down observations. If records are not made in good time, it is better to take a day off and catch up on records than to carry on. That's some great advice from another teacher.

I was told that, for research focusing on different cultures, it was important in the initial stages to write down everything that I had seen, without missing anything out, between getting up and going to bed. If you actually try and do that you will see how much patience and perseverance it requires. Writing down everything you are observing, when you are still unfamiliar with the language and the behaviour, ends up as an exercise in being forced to realize just how little you are understanding; each line is a testament to that. It is no easy thing for a person brought up in a literate society to spend hours at a time making records. So I would say that advice, to record everything missing nothing out, is unreasonable, that it is not an instruction that can practicably be followed in real life. Having said that, it remains the ideal to which the anthropologist should aim in his daily task of recording his observations. This initial stage of fieldwork requires of the anthropologist the most effort and patience of the entire process.

Once the chaos and stress of these initial few months have passed, however, and the anthropologist has become more familiar with the local language and behavior, it is likely that he will start to feel as if the research is beginning to go well. Fieldwork conducted among a different ethnic group must start first of all with the learning of the local language, and in the initial stage, when language skills are still poor, hardly any information can be obtained. As understanding of the local language improves, however, much becomes apparent about the local culture, too. Language is firmly intertwined with culture. As understanding of the local language improves, the relationships underpinning things that previously seemed quite shambolic become clear, and the way in which the society being studied takes shape becomes increasingly evident.

Fieldwork examining different ethnic groups can be described through the following timeline: first, there is the "framework" constructed by the anthropologist before entering the field; next, in the initial period of research, there is chaos and stress and the anthropologist experiencing the destruction of his initial framework; finally, there is a moment in which the anthropologist gains clarity, through a new framework based on his new understanding, about the organized and regulated way in which the target society is constructed. This final moment was described by one scholar as "a moment of sheer bliss for the anthropologist".

In the study of different cultures through fieldwork, it will always be the case that the framework constructed by

the researched in the initial stages of the study will eventually be more or less broken down in the face of reality. And in the chaos that remains, the anthropologist must take a trial-and-error approach to the construction of a new framework based in new understanding of the culture. We can even argue that the study of different ethnic groups and cultures takes it significance from the process in which the preliminary image held by the fieldworker is destroyed, to be replaced by new understanding.

4. The process of cross-cultural research

Based on the above, we can compare, somewhat schematically, cultural anthropological research to sociological research, which primarily makes use of surveys, such as written questionnaires.

Before studies using surveys can begin, a detailed research plan and hypothesis will have been drawn up after a study of the literature and review of relevant theory. The work in the field will involve collecting data via questionnaire forms prepared in advance. The next stage is to analyze that data in order to verify or disprove the hypothesis. The three stages seen here—1) problem setting and hypothesis construction, 2) data collection, and 3) data analysis and hypothesis verification—are all quite independent of each other, and the process proceeds chronologically. The amount of data collected will increase in proportion to the amount of time given over to data collection.

By contrast, in research on different cultures based on fieldwork, these various stages—problem setting, hypothesis construction, data collection, data analysis, report writing—are all conducted simultaneously, throughout the entire research period, from beginning to end, at varying levels of priority. The framework held by the researcher before beginning the fieldwork must often be reconstructed in the face of reality. Based on this new reality, encountered for the first time in the field, the researcher must re-set problems and alter the data collection and analysis methodologies in accordance with the newly set problems. The chaos into which the anthropologist finds himself falling in the initial stages of research prevents the collection of significant amounts of data during the initial to middle stages of the research, but from the middle to the end of the research period, the amount of data obtained will increase exponentially as more time is invested.

Photo 1 Studying the rituals of the Lahu of North Thailand

Photo 2 Fieldwork among the Lahu of North Thailand

5. Conclusion

Before conducting any actual fieldwork, it is recommended, of course, to study as much of the relevant literature and materials as possible. Despite this, the nature of fieldwork involving different ethnic groups means that the anthropologist must learn the language and culture from scratch, much like a child. The researcher on fieldwork must first seek to gain an overall understanding of the society and culture of the group being studied. The researcher should not concentrate on the construction of detailed lists of questions or of research hypotheses before embarking on fieldwork; at times even the setting of the research theme can be delayed. Rather, these tasks should be undertaken as part of the process of actual fieldwork, alongside the collection and analysis of data.

This type of research methodology might seem strange and unscientific, particularly when compared to the hy-

pothesis verification approach. What is distinct about research looking at ethnic groups, however, is the fact that the cultures and societies of those groups will differ significantly from those of the researcher; for this reason, a trial-and-error approach is required. It is true that such a research methodology involves considerable time and effort, but by deliberately seeking out the unfamiliar, by placing himself within the heart of the other culture, the cultural anthropologist seeks to reassess that which has always been instinctive to him, to look at it from a different perspective. As his understanding of the other culture improves, the anthropologist becomes able to compare the culture with his own, and that which was obvious and instinctive before gradually becomes less so. In this way, research on different ethnic groups and cultures is also a way of reassessing one's own ethnic group and culture from a new perspective.